Distant View of Niagara Falls

1830

By Thomas Cole
Niagara Falls, one of the continent’s most famous natural spectacles and a North American icon, is dramatically depicted in this work by Thomas Cole. His painting captures the romantic notion of the unspoiled American wilderness. For centuries, the beauty and power of Niagara Falls have been known throughout the world. To this day, visitors come to see if the falls’ legendary mystery holds true. The 167-foot-high waterfall on the Niagara River connects Lakes Erie and Ontario and is the border of the United States and Canada. Awestruck tourists and artists alike have been drawn to the falls. Cole was one of the first and the strength of his interpretation is in its expression of timeless idealism.

Cole was born in England, the son of a textile manufacturer. He lived for seventeen years in urbanized Lancashire until his family immigrated to America in 1819. Living his childhood in an industrialized area of England made Cole keenly aware of the threat of commercial exploitation to the wilderness regions of his new homeland. He became passionately devoted to the natural scenery of his adopted country. In the United States, Cole studied for a time at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, though he was largely a self-taught artist. For a while, he made his living as a portrait painter and engraver, until his first landscapes were exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1824. His work was shown a year later in New York, bringing him almost instant renown as an artist. In 1829, before going to study the countryside of England, France, and Italy, Cole traveled to Niagara Falls for his first time. “I anticipated much,” he wrote, “but the grandeur of the falls far exceed anything I had been told of them—I am astonished that there have been no good pictures of them—I think the subject a sublime one.”

For Cole and other artists, Niagara Falls, the Adirondacks, the White Mountains, the Berkshires and the Hudson River Valley became the backdrop for communicating the reverence of pristine nature, untouched by man. Though never organized as a group, these American landscape artists were referred to as the **Hudson River School** and included painters Thomas Doughty (1793–1856) and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886). These artists established a tradition of landscape paintings later seen as patriotic in its celebration of the unique features of America. Their compositions included mountains and lakes, broad wilderness panoramas, interior woodlands, and shore scenes of the northeastern United States. Like the **transcendental philosophers** of the period, they believed that the spiritual was revealed in nature. They believed that painting could be the revelation of God’s handiwork. Although they sketched outdoors, most painted in their studios so that their pictures were often a combination of ideal and real views.

Cole sketched many versions of the falls from several different viewpoints. His sketchbooks include notes on color and composition. Cole studied the sky as much as the landscape; his notebook is filled with observations about the sky at specific moments. He noted that, “the clouds in such a sky
are very romantically shaped. The[y] fly in strata one above another the underside of each cloud is darker and bolder than the upper... The clouds in the highest part are the warmest into their shades, but their lights perfectly white.” Along with his sketches, Cole wrote abundantly about his work, nature, and the falls in particular.

In 1835, Cole delivered his lecture Essay on American Scenery before the New York Lyceum. The essay articulated the spirit that was to dominate American landscape painting for almost thirty years. In it he spoke of the waterfalls and said, “Ah Niagara! that wonder of the world!—where the sublime and the beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain. In gazing on it we feel as though a great void had been filled in our minds—our conceptions expand—we become part of what we behold!”

To Cole, Niagara represented grandeur and the sacred in the American landscape. The red autumn trees depicted are sugar maples (a tree that grows mainly in North America), and on the cliff Cole posed two Native Americans (one kneeling and another standing) as if in reverence. The figures are miniature compared to their surroundings. Their small size gives credence to the idea that man is insignificant in the grand scheme of nature. The fall setting creates a sense of loss and time passing away. By 1830, when Cole painted this scene, both the Native Americans and the virginal landscape had disappeared from much of the eastern United States. The mist, created by the falls crashing down from a 167-foot-high cliff upon a pool of water and rocks, rises up vigorously. This energetic juncture of water and the storm clouds looming above the tree line creates a vision of power. The sky above is filled with boldly painted white billowing clouds that catch the reflection of the sun hidden behind them. The brilliant lighting of this wave of clouds resonates with the peace seen in the water on the Niagara River just below the falls at the feet of the two dwarfed figures. Their meditative poses reflect their deep respect and harmonious relationship with nature.

Cole uses a combination of color, light, and composition to create a meditative mood. The thick dabs of paint in rich, fiery colors make up the autumn foliage. The intense white foam of the water as it cascades over the edge and flows into the whirlpool is both powerful and peaceful. Sunlight reflects gently upon the swirling pool and the trees in the distance. Cole’s range of complementary colors in greens and reds create harmony. The bright white clouds gleaming with the sun’s rays contrast with the bold dark purple clouds and draw our eyes to the heavens. The sunlight behind the clouds rises above the canvas lifting our thoughts beyond this earthly scene.

Where does Cole place the viewer in relationship to the falls? The viewer looking out into the landscape has a sense of floating above the tree line. The “where” has to do with the level of insight on which we accept this ethereal scene. Cole places the viewer above the earthly plane to contemplate this magnificent wonder and raise us to a spiritual level. For Cole, untamed nature is also the visual form of man’s spiritual longing and desires. He said of the outdoors, “Overall, rocks, wood, and water, brooded the spirit of repose, and the silent energy of nature stirred the soul to its inmost depths.”

Distant View of Niagara Falls is Cole’s utopian and romantic vision of the western New York geographic region. In the 1830s, industrialization had already begun encroaching on the natural landscape of the falls, with the surrounding area characterized by factories, scenic overlooks, hotels, and tourists. His landscape is not topographically accurate. Cole includes a lush forest instead of the factories and tourist spots present in his own day. In the 19th century the growing concern for the preservation of the land and natural resources was shared by both artists and writers who addressed the myriad issues surrounding the conservation of the underdeveloped wilderness and who hoped to instill in Americans the need to preserve the land for the future. In his novels, American author James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) challenged the public to take a look at actions responsible for consuming natural resources. His writings also impart the idea that nature affects man’s inner being. Cooper said of Cole’s look at nature, “I know of no painter whose works manifest such high poetic feeling as those of Cole.”

Cole’s reverence and awe of nature are clearly seen in this rendering of the falls. Many of Cole’s paintings have preserved the memory of the landscape’s purity and grandeur for future generations. He was concerned with capturing the magnificence of nature for one’s spiritual and creative development.

Notes

Glossary

**conservationist**: a person who promotes conservation of natural resources. As a national movement it owes much to President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) and his chief forest advisor, Gifford Pinchot (1865–1946), who advocated a utilitarian, “wise use” approach to the land.

**ethereal**: relating to regions beyond the earth.

**Hudson River School**: term applied retrospectively to a number of 19th-century American landscape painters inspired by the pride in the beauty of their homeland. The writing of James Fenimore Cooper also played a part in shaping their attitudes. The patriotic spirit of the painters won them great popularity.

**James Fenimore Cooper** (1789–1865): major U.S. novelist, author of the novels of frontier adventures. They include *Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pioneers*, whose principal character is the former wilderness scout Natty Bumppo (alias Leatherstocking) who opposes the march of progress. *The Pioneers* is considered a truly original American novel.

**New York Lyceum**: the Lyceum of Natural History later known as the New York Academy of Sciences, co-founded by John Torrey, botanist and chemist known for his extensive studies of North American flora.

**topographical**: the detailed and accurate description of a place or region.

**transcendentalism**: 19th-century movement of writers and philosophers based on a belief in the essential unity of all creation and that knowledge of reality is derived from intuitive sources.
Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

• What’s the News Across the Nation?
  *Illinois Learning Standards: 3, 5*

Imagine you are a New York City newspaper journalist in the 1830s. You have just traveled hundreds of miles to arrive at Niagara Falls. Your job is to write about your experience. You have just met the two Native Americans on the ledge in this painting. Develop a list of questions to ask these men and imagine their answers. Write an article to describe your experience.

• Words Create Pictures
  *Illinois Learning Standards: 2, 26*

Have students read the following excerpt from the novel *The Pioneers* (1823) by James Fenimore Cooper. What are the main ideas? How does the dialogue of language reflect an earlier time? Have students recreate the following portion from *The Pioneers* into a short skit. If time permits, create costumes, props, and setting.

“This comes of settling a country!” he [Leatherstocking] said; “here have I known the pigeons to fly for forty long years, and, till you made your clearings, there was nobody to skear [sic] or to hurt them. I love to see them come into the woods, for they were company to a body; hurting nothing; being, as it was, as harmless as a garter snake.”...

“You sayest well, Leatherstocking,” cried Marmaduke, “and I begin to think it time to put an end to this work of destruction.”

“Put an end, Judge, to your clearings. An’t the woods His [God] work as well as the pigeons? Use, but don’t waste. Wasn’t the woods made for the beasts and birds to harbor in? and when man wanted their flesh, their skins, or their feathers, there’s the place to seek them.”

• Journey to the Center of the Falls
  *Illinois Learning Standards: 2, 3*

Imagine that you have traveled behind the curtain of water called Niagara Falls. Write a fantasy story about what you find. How will you get there? What does this place look like? Who will be there and what will happen? When will the adventure take place?

• Metaphorically Speaking
  *Illinois Learning Standards: 4*

Thomas Cole used seasons as metaphors. Discuss how this autumn painting is a metaphor for:

1. The relationship of Native Americans to U.S. government policies.
2. The encroaching of industrialization on the American wilderness.

Have students write and present a speech on one of the topics to persuade the class. The viewpoints could include: Native Americans, the U.S. government, commercial interests, or the preservationists of American wilderness.

• Over the Falls in a Barrel
  *Illinois Learning Standards: 6*

Water passes over Niagara Falls at a rate of 130,000 cubic feet per second. How many cubic feet pass over the falls in 60 seconds? In 10 minutes? Convert cubic feet to gallons and liters using the formula below. How many gallons and liters pass over the falls in a second, 1 minute, 10 minutes?

Number of cubic feet x 7.480519 = gallons
Number of cubic feet x 28.316847 = liters
Number of gallons x 3.785412 = liters

• Falling for Niagara
  *Illinois Learning Standards: 12, 26*

Have students describe and color all elements in the painting that indicate this is an autumn scene. Have students record in a chart the color of the flora and sky outside their classroom window daily for a portion or all of the school year. In what month do the sky and the leaves most closely resemble the autumn colors and sky in this painting? How and when do the colors change for winter, spring, and summer? Have students investigate why seasons change.
**Water, Water Everywhere**  
*Illinois Learning Standards: 12*

Have students explain the five water cycles. How many of the cycles can they find in this painting? Have students sketch a section of the picture that correlates with a water cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Water Cycle</th>
<th>Sketch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>percolation</strong></td>
<td>A process in which water filters through the soil and is absorbed by plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>transpiration</strong></td>
<td>A process in which plants give off moisture through leaf surfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>evaporation</strong></td>
<td>Water vaporizes into the air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>condensation</strong></td>
<td>Cool air causes water vapor to form into a cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>precipitation</strong></td>
<td>Cloud falls to the ground as rain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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• **Save the Forest!**  
*Illinois Learning Standards: 16, 26*

At what point in United States history did Americans recognize the toll that “civilization” has on the land and the natural resources? Have students investigate what steps were taken to monitor and/or preserve the disappearing wilderness. Research 19th-and early-20th-century conservationists such as Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot (leader of the Forest Service), and naturalist John Muir. Discuss contemporary environmental issues facing your community, city, or state. Create a poster to promote awareness of the value of a natural resource or endangered species.

• **Draw Me to Your Sights**  
*Illinois Learning Standards: 26, 27*

*Distant View of Niagara Falls* is a compilation of many different outlooks that Cole sketched and then combined to form an effective and dramatic picture. Have each student select an area near home or school to sketch at various times. Record natural elements and buildings as well as the colors, shapes, and lines that can be seen in the area over time. Have each student combine the most interesting views into one picture, creating an ideal representation of the area. Display and discuss.

• **Wayfinding**  
*Illinois Learning Standards: 7, 17*

Find Niagara Falls on a map. What is the distance between Chicago and Niagara Falls by land, water, and air? Calculate the rate of speed for different modes of transportation. How long would the journey take on each mode of transportation? Develop math sentences to compute the distances and times.

• **Designing Niagara Falls for the New Millennium**  
*Illinois Learning Standards: 16, 26*

If you have traveled to Niagara Falls, how is Cole’s view different from what you saw? If you have not traveled to the falls, take an online journey to [http://www.niagarafallslive.com/](http://www.niagarafallslive.com/). How has human activity changed the natural landscape of the falls? What industry and/or recreation surrounds this natural wonder today? Imagine you are a city planner in the year 2050. Sketch the area surrounding Niagara Falls landscape as you would develop it for the new century.
Related Resources


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